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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 000219

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STATE FOR NEA/PD, NEA/ARPI; S/CT FOR MARK THOMPSON FROM RYE
INFO NSC FOR ABRAMS, DOD/OSD FOR SCHENKER AND MATHENY
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2/12/2011

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)

SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA AND KIDNAPPING TAPES

REF: DOHA 104 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

1. (S) Summary: Officials from Embassies Doha and Baghdad met with Al Jazeera leadership on Feb 11 to discuss Al Jazeera's handling of videos that Al Jazeera receives from terrorist hostage takers, its broader editorial policies, and the media's role in hostage and terrorist crises. Al Jazeera officials defended their policy of showing but not sharing hostage videos, but agreed to raise the issue with the Al Jazeera Board of Directors for reconsideration after hearing technical arguments about how the videos can be used in a hostage case. Al Jazeera impressed upon the U.S. side the breadth and scope of its reach, its impending growth and reorganization, and its sincerity in its struggle to be accepted as a global, independent, legitimate, mainstream media network, while protecting its desire not to be "held hostage" to the agendas of either governments or terrorist groups. End Summary.

1. (S/NF) Embassy Doha Public Affairs Officer Mirembe Nantongo and Embassy Baghdad Hostage Working Group Director Erik Rye met with Wadah Khanfar, Managing Director for Al Jazeera on Feb 11, primarily to convince Al Jazeera to share copies of hostage videos delivered to them by what are most likely terrorists organizations in Iraq. Khanfar is an urbane and smooth spokesman who dealt directly with the issue at hand. Embassy Doha has built cooperative personal relationships within Al Jazeera that resulted in a hostage video being passed to the United States once, but that was an exception to official policy, which is to allow Embassy officials on-site viewing and note-taking from the tape. Khanfar articulated a video policy that was case-specific, but based on the principles of not giving free advertising to propagandists--terrorists or otherwise; not showing suffering or humiliation; protecting the safety of the hostage foremost; and showing only those portions of the tape deemed newsworthy--such as proof of life of the hostage. Khanfar said that for these reasons they will note editorially that the origins of the tape cannot be confirmed nor the content corroborated; they will usually not show either the terrorists nor the hostage speaking, but will note in a voice-over the contents of the tape. (Note: these voice-overs have included the demands and claims of responsibility of hostage-taking groups in the past. End note.) Khanfar also stated that Al Jazeera would make an editorial statement condemning the kidnapping and calling for the victim's release when the victim was a journalist, but would otherwise maintain journalistic objectivity when running stories on other hostages. Khanfar noted that in the Jill Carroll case, they had worked with Islamic and Arab community leaders to publicize statements of condemnation.

2. (S) Rye explained that minute details in such tapes, such as colors and patterns of background materials, can be used to corroborate other information that could break open a case, and can't possibly be described accurately enough with any amount of note-taking. Rye also explained that any such information is most useful only if it has not yet been broadcast, since once hostage-takers know the tape has aired, they can cut off connections to information and individuals in the tape. Information on tapes is time-sensitive, and thus getting access to them immediately is critical. Also, given the number of people involved in working on hostage cases within the USG, often remotely located, it is necessary to be able to transmit copies of the tape in order to "connect the dots" of useful information. Having one USG observer view the tape simply isn't effective. Rye also commented that statements of condemnation are desirable in general, but in a specific hostage case can be a double-edged sword if they have an unpredictable impact on kidnappers, and thus in an ideal situation, any media messages would be coordinated with those handling the case. Rye noted that hostage tapes were different from tapes of other news events, since they held information pertaining to an ongoing crime--the kidnapping--as well as also holding potential clues to a future crime--the killing of a hostage. For those reasons, hostage tapes should be subjected to a more nuanced "tape policy". Lastly, Rye noted that Al Jazeera had an

interest in not making concessions to hostage-takers in the form of airing their videos on-demand, since it would only encourage further attempts by terrorist groups to manipulate Al Jazeera.

13. (S) Khanfar appeared to take these arguments to heart, and noted examples when Jazeera had refused to air certain tapes, and described how the propaganda portions of videos were excised. He appeared sincere about nurturing Al Jazeera's journalistic independence and integrity, and defending it from being seen as the mouthpiece of extremism. He articulated in detail Al Jazeera's desire to remain free of influence from terrorist groups. Khanfar agreed to raise the issue of hostage tapes with the board of directors at their next meeting. But he also noted that their lawyers had been advising them to avoid handling tapes in a manner that would lead to subpoenas and possible court appearances by Al Jazeera staff. Whatever their next decision, the potential of tapes to be considered evidence in legal proceedings will remain a crucial factor in determining the level of cooperation Al Jazeera will offer. Khanfar also was sensitive to the idea of being asked to do something particularly for the United States, and clearly did not want to be in a position where they would be seen doing favors. The U.S. side suggested that other governments with hostages in Iraq would most likely be appreciative of increased access to videos, and any hostage video policy should be applied equally to all countries with hostages.

14. (S) The U.S. team also met with Editor-in-Chief Ahmed Sheikh, who unlike Khanfar digressed into historical and political arguments for Arab nationalism and Palestinian statehood. He seemed to have a genuine concern for hostage survival, however, and noted that they feared not airing tapes could provoke a killing, but that airing the tapes with deadlines would "start the clock running". Rye noted that third parties were never responsible for the actions of terrorists or hostage takers, and could not go too far down the road of restricting or taking actions to influence the hostage takers, since that ultimately led to making concessions and opening Al Jazeera to further manipulations. Sheikh said that he wished they never received any tapes, and was glad that a recent Jill Carroll video ended up with a Kuwaiti TV station and not Al Jazeera. (Note: Although the tapes are no doubt a headache, his remark is probably somewhat disingenuous since Al Jazeera continues to make a name for itself in the Arab and Western worlds breaking stories of this nature. His remark also conflicts with an offhand admission by Khanfar that they see other stations such as the Kuwaiti channel that aired the Carroll video as competitors. Sheikh speculated that the Kuwaiti channel--which aired Carroll speaking--was probably given the tape because Al Jazeera ran the last Carroll video with a brief clip and voice-overs only and that Al Jazeera had effectively driven the hostage takers to another channel to get the amount of coverage they desired. End note.)

15. (S/NF) Comment: these and other Al Jazeera officials also explained the coming expansion of Al Jazeera into a truly global network, including an English language channel and an over-arching management structure that will enforce uniform policies across its several outlets. As Al Jazeera continues to define its place in the media world and its relationship with the West, its role in influencing popular perceptions of terrorist events and groups will only increase. This increasing responsibility has already resulted in a clearly defined code of ethics and editorial policies, and increasing transparency in how those guidelines are carried out. They know they are under the microscope, and want to be taken seriously. Al Jazeera's growing globalization will only increase the pressure upon them to adhere to international standards of journalism and result in an organization that can be dealt with upon familiar ground, and within a framework already established by the mainstream media. End Comment.

UNTERMEYER